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8 August 1968

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Preliminary Trip Report from George Carver

As you may know George Carver has been on an observation trip to Saigon for the past few weeks. He has sent a preliminary report on his travels, which may be of interest to you. His report follows.

1. The trip was useful and enlightening, thanks in large measure to invaluable assistance from our Station and other Mission components. I visited, and did some travelling in, I, II and IV Corps, talked with Corps commanders, other ARVN officers, province chiefs, police officers and a broad spectrum of US military and civilian officials. I did not travel in III Corps but had good sessions with our old and new Regional Officers. In Saigon, I saw a wide variety of people including Thieu, Ky, Prime Minister Huong, Interior Minister Khiem, Police Director Hai, right-wing Catholics, left-wing Catholics, intellectuals, in and out politicians, and even Tri Quang. I had a profitable long session with General Abrams on 6 August, a good visit with his J-2, General Davidson, and a wrap-up lunch with Ambassadors Bunker and Berger. The following are my principal impressions.

2. The over-all caliber and performance of our Saigon Station is first class; it is highly thought of by the rest of the Mission, and does CIA great credit. No visitor can fail to be impressed by the high degree of professionalism which marks the Station's personnel, their dedication to duty, and their effective discharge of complex responsibilities in trying and often dangerous circumstances.

3. On political matters, during our conversation President Thieu took up the Lien Minh front, endorsed it, and said he would back it. As the Station has reported, Thieu also asked for US support and said he planned to take this topic up with Bunker at their next meeting. The Station drafted a concrete program which I went over with Bunker and Berger during our 6 August lunch. Bunker approved it and I am bringing a copy back to Washington.

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The Lien Minh is a far from perfect vehicle but it can be most useful in Vietnam and, particularly, abroad if we recognize that it is a front and do not expect it to become an instant political party.

4. As for over-all impressions, our adversaries are beset with mounting problems engendered by casualties, General Abrams skillful spoiling operations which are rendered increasingly successful by ever better prior intelligence, ARC LIGHT strikes (ditto on improved effectiveness through better intelligence), somewhat improved ARVN performance (in some areas), popular disaffection with Tet and post-Tet terrorism (plus irritation at increased taxation and impressment), and the strides being made in the attack on at least the lower levels of the infrastructure. All of this has produced Communist performance shortfalls, frustrated plans, and declining morale in at least some areas. Our adversaries are nonetheless still formidable and are almost certainly planning a major upsurge of offensive activity in the very near future. I personally expect Danang to be attacked any time, believe Saigon will be hit hard within the next two weeks, and anticipate ancillary attacks on Chu Lai, Quang Tri and Hoi An in I Corps and Tay Ninh and other exposed province towns in III Corps. I doubt if there will be much besides harassment in II and IV Corps. The VC will certainly be repulsed, but they will make lots of noise and could score some limited successes, particularly in outlying areas. General Lam, the refreshingly perceptive I Corps commander, hit it about right when (speaking for Danang) he said he was certain he could keep the VC from taking the city, but was not certain he could prevent their slipping in small groups capable of causing considerable trouble before they were killed or captured.

5. The people I have talked to seem convinced that the recent downturn in enemy activity was almost certainly dictated by a need for regroupment, refitting and other preparations for a new offensive. They believe that recent Communist activity patterns were not adopted as conciliatory or de-escalating gestures, though Hanoi is doubtless delighted for them to be so interpreted abroad since this improves Hanoi's image and generates political mileage out of a course of action Hanoi actually embarked on as an essential prelude to intensified struggle. Though the attack indicators are rapidly mounting, Hanoi could probably still abort or delay at least the major assaults if changes in the international political climate made this seem advisable. Despite a few counter currents, however, the weight of presently available evidence strongly suggests that major attacks are imminent.

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6. On our side, there is wide variation from locale to locale, but I generally found the provincial picture less bleak than anticipated. In many areas we seem to have recovered substantially from Tet, and in some places are doing rather better than that. Where RD teams are assigned responsibilities bearing some recognizable resemblance to those for which they were trained, their performance is generally adequate or better. Where these teams are used as outer fringe security units, they are understandably not very effective. Always allowing for local variation, the Provincial Reconnaissance Units are performing effectively (often very effectively) countrywide. The Static Census Grievance program is almost everywhere a first class producer of local infrastructure intelligence.

7. Now that the word has come down through GVN channels unmistakably loud and clear, the Phoenix program (attack on the infrastructure) is becoming a bright spot on the provincial scene. Naturally not all of the mushrooming District Intelligence and Operations Centers are yet worthy of the name. But, thanks to all that Phoenix involves and has stimulated, we are now substantially ahead of where we used to be on local, hard infrastructure information, and this vital program is being extended briskly.

8. The critical provincial problem remains, as always, first and second echelon Vietnamese leadership (PF platoon leader through district and province chief). Where this is good, good things happen; where it is bad, so too is the local situation. The adjoining I Corps provinces of Quang Nam (soft) and Quang Tin (encouraging) provide an excellent parallel illustration of this point. Quang Tin, incidentally, provided a striking example of what one good, gutsy district chief can accomplish in a short span of time (eight months) in a district (Thinh Ban) previously considered hopeless for many reasons (including the frequent presence or proximity of the 2nd NVA Division). My own belief (shared, I found, by province chiefs and others who were themselves good local leaders), is that the local leadership problem is not going to be solved until the GVN begins tapping the pool our adversaries have always drawn on so profitably for just this purpose: bright peasant youths who never darkened the door of any lycée. A systematic GVN exploitation of this talent resource could produce dramatic results in a very short span of time.

9. In Saigon, President Thieu steadily strengthens his position and acts more like an effective President with every passing day. Thieu's increasingly evident primacy has taken at least temporary care of matters such as the former Thieu-Ky problem. The political surface is reasonably calm, but beneath this surface things on which we should keep a watchful eye are beginning to stir. Vietnamese politics are heavily permeated with an air

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of malaise and worried uncertainty which virtually every Vietnamese I talked to said was caused by confusion about American policy and intentions. Honolulu did much to dispel this malaise (at least temporarily) among key leaders themselves. It also helped with Saigon politicians (amateur and professional), but to a considerably lesser extent. Thieu's pattern of recent appointments plus his penchant (I think unconscious) for lapsing into Diem era styles of speech (such as mandarin phrasings) has started many tongues wagging about a return of "Can Laoism," a not so trivial point because the 1963 coup is still a strong (though latent) emotional issue. Tri Quang, naturally, is already convinced that Thieu is "Diem reincarnated," and that he is determined to do in the Buddhists (i. e., Tri Quang) as soon as possible. Militant Buddhist fanaticism on this score constitutes no immediate threat to stability, but that could change if Tri Quang were ever handed a real concrete issue to work on. Many military officers (particularly those who carried out the 1963 coup and benefited the most therefrom) are somewhat edgy about the return of the ancien régime, increasingly concerned about Thieu's constancy in combatting Communism and, of course, quite uneasy about their own future under Thieu's increasingly powerful hands.

10. Not surprisingly, Interior Minister Khiem provides a handy, catalytic symbol for several of the attitudes cited above. I fear he may eventually cause us some other problems as well, despite the fact that he is now on good behavior, busily breaking bureaucratic bottlenecks on programs Americans like, and apparently backing Colonel Hai's anti-corruption drive in the police (more I suspect because this cleans out Loan's men than because of any intrinsic moral antipathy to corruption). As Interior Minister, Khiem has a lot of at least potential power (e. g., nomination of all province chiefs). His ambition is quite imperfectly concealed; the four silver stars beside his office suite's outer door remind all who pass that ARVN's most senior general sits within. From our conversation I got the strong impression that he has learned nothing and forgotten nothing since his ouster in 1964. (For example, he told me that Revolutionary Development is simply the Strategic Hamlet Program under a new name.) His former colleagues (the ones who threw him out) are decidedly edgy about the short list of scores to settle and accounts to square that they are convinced Khiem carries in his pocket, with their names figuring prominently thereon. By no accident, with Khang's replacement by Do Cao Tri in III Corps, none of the leading members of this circle now has a troop command; but they still have friends and are still around. (Incidentally, if we think we have problems with Ky, wait until the US press discovers Tri's penchant for colorful, quotable statements, particularly on the subject of Cambodia.)

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11. Even describing the attitudes outlined in the two preceding paragraphs implicitly exaggerates their present or immediate importance. These are all possible causes of future difficulty, not current concerns. On the whole, despite the real Communist menace and emotional worries about American policy, I found the political atmosphere in Saigon at least momentarily healthier than it has been in over a decade. Vietnamese moods are mercurial, but formerly repressed or taboo thoughts and ideas -- peace, settlement, even hazy notions of victory in a finite time frame -- are now openly talked about. The light of day is helping to dispel at least some of their mystery for the Vietnamese. Thieu's government may be strongly liked by only a few and distrusted (in some measure) by many. It is inclined (I think dangerously but not irremediably so) to approach Vietnam's problems with the same concepts that permitted these problems to reach their present crisis proportions, but for the time being, at least, Thieu's government is governing.

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RJS	
GAC/GWA	✓
WM/DD	✓
AS/IN	
ED/L	
SB	
DM/TG	16
PW	

Mr. Bromley Smith

I believe the President will be interested to read this report. Would you please pouch it to him at the Ranch.

For your information, and that of Walt's, George Carver returns to Washington late today and will be briefing the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board tomorrow.

Richard Helms

Attachment - 1
Preliminary Trip Report
from George Carver

8 August 1968

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The Honorable Dean Rusk

George Carver returns to Washington late today and will be available thereafter if you care to talk with him.

(Signed) Richard Helms

Richard Helms

Attachment - 1
Preliminary Trip Report
from George Carver

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Identical memo with attachment sent to: Katzenbach, Bundy, Clifford, Nitze, and Wheeler.

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